Gender in Sociolinguistics: A Concise Review on Linguistic Sexism

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ABSTRACT: Until recently, Biology explained the socially "normal", in the Social Sciences as well. The biological difference (and the different anatomical characteristics) entailed the difference of roles according to Sex (male, female) and influenced the perception that each person had for himself/herself ("biologization"). During the last years, the "de-biologization" of the sciences has essentially been achieved, including the science of Linguistics, by introducing into them the analytical category of "gender". Since the 1980s, the counterbalance between biological and social gender was disputed and it was argued that gender is exclusively a construction of society and culture. A strong opinion, in the context of the above construction, is that the Discourse and language reflect hierarchical/empowering social realities, which are not "innocent" towards gender inequalities and discriminations. Consequently, the grid of predominant gendered prejudices and stereotypes is reproduced and perpetuated through them, depending on the historical and cultural conditions. A concise historical review of that issue is presented in this paper.

Keywords- Sociolinguistics, Sexism, Linguistic sexism, Women's studies

I. INTRODUCTION

The biological/natural gender (Sex: male, female) is morphologically marked through grammatical gender (masculine, feminine and neuter) in the languages of the globe, although neither in a corresponding manner between natural and grammatical gender (e.g., masculine for male) nor to the same extent [1]. In the first case for example, words of feminine grammatical gender may denote both natural genders (male/female), as in the Greek noun "αλεπού" (= fox), or a genderless noun like "δικαιοσύνη" (= justice). In the second case, there are languages that mark three grammatical genders (i.e., masculine, feminine and neuter) in articles, adjectives, nouns and pronouns (e.g., Greek), others that mainly mark them in personal pronouns (e.g., in English he/she/it) or occasionally two grammatical genders in nouns (e.g., actor/actress) and others exhibiting a variety of combinations [1]. In this linguistic and social context, linguistic sexism expresses bias in favor of one gender (usually men), thus treating the other one in a discriminatory manner [2]. A typical example of this practice is the words for prestigious occupations or positions of social power (e.g., chairman, general, doctor, lawyer, engineer, etc.), socially denoting professions once "closed" for women.

The relationship between linguistic expression and gender has been extensively considered by women/feminist studies and especially the scientific fields of sociolinguistics and speech analysis have come to the conclusion that this relationship is a social construction well embedded in western societies [3]. On the basis of linguistic relativism, which is after all the position that all the sociolinguistic approaches and the (critical) analysis of speech converge, it is argued that "certain aspects of socio-cultural organization and the way in which things can be seen could be dependent on certain aspects of the particular language organization" ([4], p. 41); a hypothesis that is argued for, as language and society are in a relationship of interaction [5]. Specifically, Spender [6] claimed that the language was shaped by men and the meanings of words were defined by those people who constituted the "rule", through their social power. So, women are forced to "translate" or adapt words and meanings that were not created to express their own female subjectivity and experience. As the reality is built and unconsciously relied mainly upon language, they who control language control the reality as well [7].

As it has been known at least since the early 1970s, when the analytical category "Gender" was firstly introduced in the social sciences by A. Oakley [8], the perception that gender is based on physiology or biology ("biologization") is rejected and it is confirmed that Gender, which is an eminent social, economic and cultural structure, is recognized as the basis of social structure

[9]; as noted aptly, it helped to reveal the western-focused and socially constructed character of the contradiction "nature vs. culture" and the distinction of the notion of Gender from its biological dimension ("de-biologization") was made possible [10]. In this respect, the term "analytical category of gender" refers to gender as product of social relationships in real and changing societies, namely, what does "social role" means and "social role of Gender", in particular. Social roles are the behaviors or functions of a person within a group. At the same time, they are defined as types of social behavior of someone, in relation to the social and cultural schemata of the group and as ways of responding to the expectations of others. Therefore for an individual, the social role is to organize a certain number of behavioral patterns, which are concentrated around a social function, in a state of mutual relationships. The introduction of gender as an analytical category extended the research horizons and made it possible to diagnose the gender biases and exclusions, not only in the social sciences and humanities [9], where it was easier to identify, but also to the natural sciences that are supposed to be objective and neutral regarding gender, in public and private life [11].

Accordingly, the purpose of this article is to discuss issues of language sexism and raise awareness against it, thus contributing to the elimination of wider sexist attitudes and practices. This article demonstrates that language is able to express ideas and, through this expression, may also form the perceptions of others. Therefore, language can also shape the perceptions of individuals, and especially children, about gender roles.

II.   REVIEWING THE CONTEXT

The relationship between language and gender has been a matter of the feministic thinking and science for a long time, based on the belief that Discourse and Language reflect hierarchical/empirical social realities and contribute to the development of gender inequalities and discrimination [12]. Besides, the language and the way it refers to the entities of the world, interacts with the way this world is perceived [5]. Thus, in the context of Discourse and language, the grid of the predominant gendered prejudices and stereotypes [13] is reproduced and perpetuated, depending on the historical and cultural conditions. For example, in the Greek bibliography, searches on linguistic sexism had been restricted for a long time only in school textbooks. Louvrou [14] investigated cases of linguistic sexism in the reading textbooks of the last three grades of elementary school, while Frosi [15] explored the female language in the textbooks of Modern Greek Language. Both surveys revealed the remarkable extent to which textbooks incorporate groundless sexist assumptions and prejudices (especially regarding professions and stereotypical attitudes). In 2014, however, an extensive research was carried out [5] into the sexism of the documents of the Greek Public Administration, which led to the elaboration of the nationally much-discussed guide for the use of non-sexist language in the public administration documents [5].

The interesting dialogue, that is being developed here, focuses on two main areas:

- how genders, and especially women, use language;
- what we use to call "linguistic sexism".

Feminists of the first dynamic movements, defining linguistic sexism and challenging the predominantly gendered linguistic reality, tried to "free" their language [16]. The result of this process is the fact that, on the one hand, words that are decisive for the patriarchal system of values are disrupted in terms of their semantic content (e.g., in Greek, words for prestigious occupations are of masculine gender in non-colloquial discourse: chairman, president, general, doctor, lawyer, engineer, etc.). On the other hand, "new" (gendered) words are produced (e.g., *usherette* for feminine usher or *comedienne* for feminine comedian) or "old" ones are re-signified (in the case of Greek, for prestigious occupations with the usage of the feminine article: "o"/the_MASCULINE officer, "η"/the_FEMININE officer; Greek articles are gendered), always within the semantic framework of the qualitative new female experience. In both cases, the interpretations proposed and the evaluations that are attempted, as a rule, make use of the models of sovereignty and power and it is a fact that their use has not only caused fundamental questions but also the formulation of innovative study approaches, like the one of J. Coates [17, 18] about the diversity of female speech. Thus, the different gender expectations, which dominate a western socio-cultural context, trigger and shape specific language behavior. As to the former, Mills [19] for example argues that this behavior includes a gentle and precarious speech for women, as opposed to men's most unequivocal and competitive speech. In this context, women's speech appears to be inferior in logic, displays more sensitivity, it uses less abstract concepts, has a lesser vocabulary, uses more adjectives, adverbs of manner, insertions etc.; it is in a few words polite but mostly precarious. The relevant discussion is under way, since some scholars dispute this view [16]. The interesting point is that in many cases, the language considered to be acceptable for boys is unacceptable for girls, and whatever is surrounded by merit for the former is surrounded by demerit for the latter [15]. It is therefore not surprising that the female use of language "owes" to be adapted to the gender expectations and demands of society. In any case, the language used by men and women, on a verbal and non-verbal level, expresses not only the thoughts but also the relationships between them. Here too, attention is focused on gender-based causes that are maintained,

constructed, or even discarded through the language. On the other hand, as far as linguistic sexism is concerned, it is worth mentioning that it is one of the most painful manifestations of sexism, namely, the discriminatory practice by which people are diminished because of their sex. In societies with a long patriarchal tradition, such as Greece, women are diminished and their Discourse is on the margins, as men have a considerably greater economic and political power. For example, in 160 out of 193 national parliaments, women constitute 1/3 or less of their members [20]. In this context, it is noted both the anachronistic/hierarchical way in which women are defined, reported or not mentioned and the way in which dominant linguistic strategies are utilized in the context of gender interaction [21]. As soon as we create new words and meanings (claimed by Spender [6]), women will cease to be a "silent" group.

Since the early 1980s, Spender [6] has claimed that language not only reflects but also perpetuates and reproduces gender inequality. She also argued that concepts and meanings are products of the dominant sex, intended to express their own experiences, and thus the world is built through language as a male world in which women are trapped, invisible and silent (feminists will say unequivocally that this was not an accident). She therefore proposed the production of new meanings and/or the re-labelling of others, capable of expressing female experiences and aspirations, allowing the formulation of scientific theories by women and new interpretations of the world from the point of view of their sex. This is the only way, by her view, in which "silent" women can gain their "voice". She admits, however, that the issue of gender inequality and hierarchy is extremely complex and that changing our linguistic practice does not automatically entails the liberation from patriarchal standards. These particular views met the contrast of other linguists with a consciousness of gender. Cameron [22] for example questioned Spender's case that language is ultimately so strong. She considers that it is impossible for men to control the meanings, as these meanings are related to their contexts and to the constantly changing social and cultural environment. She, however, points out that "language does not 'reflect' society, because language is a social institution itself, deeply interrelated with culture, society and social relationships of all kinds." Therefore, "Changing the language practice is not simply a reflection of a more fundamental social change, the change in linguistic practice itself is a social change" ([22], p. 90). Spender [6], however, was not the only one who claimed that men, as a dominant group, had created language, thinking and reality. In this process, which eventually identified male subjectivity with objectivity, women had little or no participation. As Smith points out ([23], p. 14): "women are largely excluded from the production of thought patterns, but also from the images and symbols in which thought is expressed and realized." This is based on the view that once certain categories have been created in the language, then we are proceeding to organize the world according to these categories. We often ignore those elements that are not in line with these specific categories.

Thus, at that time, it was widespread that both men have constructed the world in which women have to live and if women should start to create their own world, then it is necessary to understand some of the ways that this creation is achieved. That means exploring the relationship between language and reality. Furthermore, Women's Studies are also focused on:

- criticizing the discriminatory attitude of the sciences, even the social ones, towards women;
- the development of reflection on the implications of the male perception in science, regarding its interpretations of the world and humanity;
- questioning what was described in the past as "humanity" and its individual significance;
- aggressive criticism of positivism in science and especially the view that the world can be described and measured objectively.

In spite of the strict criticism that Spender has received, it should be noted that when the constant use and application of a language ignores or detracts from the female sex, then that same language could potentially become a carrier of practices of prejudice, misogyny and/or sexism. In addition, it should be emphasized that linguistic differentiation is not based on physical/biological diversity between the sexes, but on the gender difference of the social roles that they have been assigned: power and ascendancy for men and weakness and downgrading for women, in all areas of social activity (interpersonal relationships, job positions, politics, etc.). In any case, the language belongs to concepts such as ideology, culture, socialization, etc. [24] and includes everyday interaction and forms of consciousness, which form the means of the social construction of reality [25] and constitute the identities, as "reality is not unified and unchanged but is constructed by humans, who in turn are perpetrators of the world instead of passive recipients. Within this context, language is understood as a form of social practice and has a central role in the construction of identity, while identity is not considered a consolidated and unified category, which simply exists in the minds of people" [5]. Therefore, the identity of people is important and the influence of language is not given in advance, since subjectivity (our sense of self) is a construction, while gender identities are not constant but constantly changing.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, it is worth noting that thanks to the criticism and pressure exerted by feminist scientists on the biased consideration of women in the social sciences and humanities, Gender conscious women began to examine gender discrimination and inequalities and to fill the gaps in academic knowledge, considering women as a distinct social category, whose hierarchical relationship with the equally distinct category of men had to be studied. Thus, Women's/Gender Studies have been developed, as well as an extensive international scientific dialogue on their content and significance. The referenced studies herein have been dealt with in the context of this dialogue not only as a challenge to the limits of existing knowledge but also as a legitimation of the different social and cultural experiences of women. In their view, the term "sexism" is also proposed by analogy with the term "racism", which is linked to and identified with gender stereotypes. The aim of using this explicit term was to state the ideological background and social behavior that leads to violence, racism and discrimination against women, based on their biological and anatomical differences from men [26].

According to Frazier and Sadker ([27], p. 2), sexism "is the view that human beings have a construction that determines their lives, thus considering that:

1. one sex is superior and has the right to impose on the other,
2. it is a practice with deep political content to strengthen such views,
3. societies rely on these views".

Sexism manifestations can take various forms and are reflected in either the behavior and actions of individuals or the Discourse, within linguistic sexism is developed. In particular, linguistic sexism covers a wide and varied range of verbal practices, including not only the way women are labeled and referred to in their context, but also how they are silenced and invisible. While we are unable to answer it, we can still point out the analogy of the grammatical system with the clearly downgraded and present position of women in public life and their underrepresentation in positions of responsibility and power [20]. A typical example of this underrepresentation is the higher positions of responsibility in the Greek public educational administration (116 regionally): although more than 66% of the total number of Greek educators (primary and secondary public education) are women, only 15.5% of them are appointed as regional Education Directors ([28], p. 6). This underrepresentation is evident in other educational institutions, as well [28].

In particular, according to Andronikou (in [29]), texts and their meanings reflect the social and cultural conditions, influencing the thinking and behavior of the recipients, since their interpretation depends on objective traits such as gender, income, education, profession, etc. and thus reproduce these conditions. They therefore maintain dominating or hegemonic Discourse, relating to the roles of men and women in the socio-cultural context. In any case, the relationship of Discourse and social life is conditioned by preconditions, as it is an expression of specific cultural and political conditions in which the relationships and their mutual influences are analyzed. As Cameron argues ([22], p. 88), gender inequality is preserved through the linguistic sense as follows: asymmetrical relations are legitimated by representing the domination as justifiable, concealing the fact of domination itself and making it natural, presenting as eternal and natural what is in fact historical and transitional [5].

A gender-sensitive man (according to the authors' opinion herein), P. Bourdieu [30], characterizes linguistic sexism as that linguistic interplay, where language expresses exactly the power relations between the sexes and works in such a way as to perpetuate and legitimize the power of men to the detriment of women. Whether language is sexist, it is a symptom not the disease itself. In order to change, we must first understand the strong consequences of gender division and hierarchy in every aspect of people's lives. It is obvious that a reform of language alone cannot change unequal gender relations, unless a number of other social factors and structures change as well. Since language is not a neutral vehicle in the representation of reality and it is a carrier of social values, the introduction of neutral and/or non-sexist terms does not guarantee neutral and/or non-sexist use. We believe that the elimination of linguistic sexism also depends on changes in the social and cultural context that will aim to eliminate wider sexist attitudes and practices. However, we cannot remain inactive. Experience has shown that although the process of change is usually beyond the consciousness, it is possible to propose (or even attempt to impose) changes, especially in the context of linguistic policy [5]. We also need to resist the view that language sexism is an outdated problem. As language is constantly changing, along with the wider social context in which it is used, the issue remains timely and requires a constant review of the issues involved and the widening and constant updating of the dialogue, which can only be directly linked to the overlapping dialogue of gender asymmetry altogether.

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